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Controversy trails labourer's death in Celestial church

Victor Ayeni

Following the death of a labourer on its premises, the Celestial Church of Christ, Overcomers Parish, Oke-Ira Nla, Ajah, Lagos State, was enmeshed in an allegation of ritual killing.

On Thursday, June 1, 2023, the church building was razed by an angry mob after the labourer, identified as Amos (popularly called Dongo) died while evacuating the overflowing cesspit of the church.

Saturday PUNCH gathered that the deceased, a father of three, who also doubled as a commercial motorcycle rider in the neighbourhood, was contacted by the church to clear the septic tank, which he commenced about the midnight hour.

Residents said they were told by leaders of the church that while Amos was working, his feet slipped off the ladder, leading to his fall and death. However, the deceased's relatives and several residents said they suspected foul play.

Amos' brother, who simply gave his name as Peter, told our correspondent that after the incident happened, the family went to check the cesspit and discovered that it was not deep enough to have drowned him.

He said, "Around 4am, I saw members of the church trooping into our compound and asking for my neighbour, so I called him out. One of the church people, who had lived here before, Alex, explained to us that Dongo was hired by the church to clear their septic tank and while he was working there around 1am, his leg slipped off the ladder and he fell into the soak-away."

"What we were told initially was that he landed on his head and he was rushed to a hospital and from there was taken to the mortuary. But we were not convinced that he died there. Because a man entered there to retrieve his body and drank the same water and he was said to be unconscious and was also rushed to the hospital. Is that septic tank a canal that can swallow a person?"

"We went to that septic tank and inserted a long stick into it; the people around us were surprised at the shallow depth of the soak-away. We recovered Dongo's torn clothes from the soak-away and a long piece of cloth that we believe was used to strangle his neck. We also found a silver wristwatch there, which we were sure was not his."

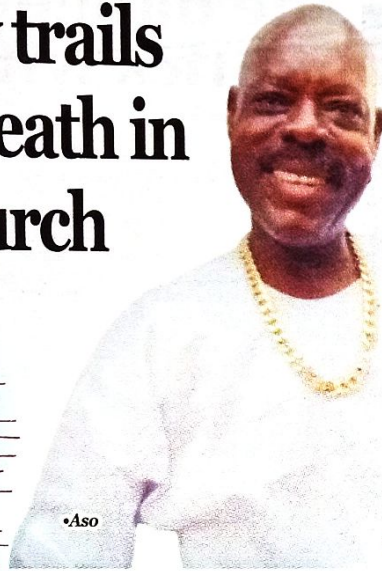
Allegation of ritual
Narrating why the church building was razed, Isaac stated that the seeming contradiction in the information about the whereabouts of Amos body ignited the outrage which led to the arson.

He said, "After they initially told us his corpse had been delivered to a mortuary, we heard from someone that Dongo's corpse was actually deposited in the church. That was how we mobilised a crowd and when we got to a room in the church, we saw his corpse there, but the youths with us were too many and too difficult to control and that was how the church was destroyed."

"We checked his body and saw that no part of his body was removed or mutilated, although we saw blood coming from his eyes and mouth. There was also a cow on the church premises, which the mob took away."

In a video seen by our correspondent, Amos' lifeless body was seen on the floor of a room which had the same blue and white colour paint of the church, while several people could be heard crying bitterly in the background.

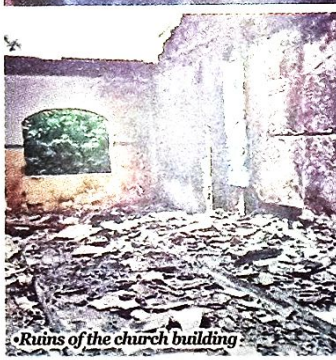
One of Amos' relatives, Isaac Yisa, during a phone interview with Saturday PUNCH, said he found some inconsistencies in the church's account of how Amos died.



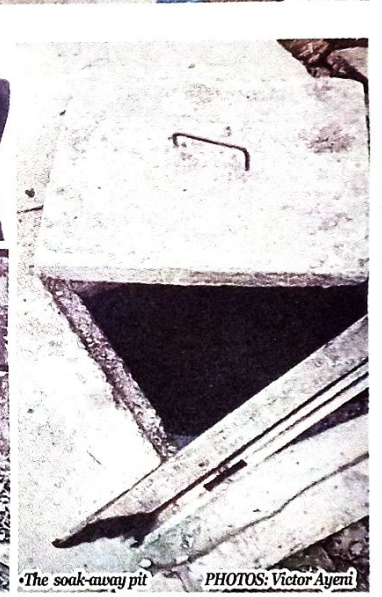
•Aso



•Yisa



•Ruins of the church building



•The soak-away pit

PHOTOS: Victor Ayeni

"They said Dongo was taken to a hospital, was declared dead at the hospital and the corpse was taken to a mortuary. When I was called and informed of his demise, I told them I had nothing to say and that I would go to the mortuary the next day so that they would tell me where the corpse was."

"But the thing is that they told me that the corpse was in the mortuary and the cleric of the church went to report this case at a police station. But we were left with unanswered questions: did the septic tank slab break on him while he was inside it or when he was about to climb outside? We also didn't know the identity of the man who rescued him from there."

"When we saw the ladder he climbed, we observed that the ladder was very strong and if you placed the ladder inside the septic tank, a human being cannot enter because of its tightness, so I am wondering how somebody would fall inside that kind of pit and even give up."

"The level of the water in it cannot swallow up a small boy, so the narration of Dongo's death sounded funny. We saw blood coming out from his eyes, and mouth and his shirt had been torn," he stated.

A resident, Seun Mojed, said when he approached the church with others after the report of the incident became known to the community, the church leaders were reluctant to provide a coherent answer.

"When I asked for his body, they asked me to go to the back of the church and I found him where he was laid down and covered with two white clothes with blood rushing out of his nose and mouth. He looked like he was beaten to death."

"When I told the others that Dongo's corpse was still in the church, a mob rushed to the scene and began to demolish the building and razed it to the ground. His family thought his corpse had been deposited in the mortuary."

So, when people got here and began to wail, the cleric asked, "Why are you people shouting?"

"That was what incensed the mob who accused the church of killing the man and went to town with the allegation that Amos' eyes and genitals were missing. At that time, the church said the police were present to move the corpse, but things had gone out of control. The senior shepherd of the church was found in hiding by the mob in someone's house; he was brought to the church and brutally beaten."

Brutalised cleric speaks
In an interview with a national newspaper (not Saturday PUNCH), the Senior Shepherd of CCC Overcomers Parish, James Aso, while speaking from his hospital bed, denied the allegations.

He described the efforts made by members of the church to resuscitate Amos, who was declared dead at the hospital before the body was returned to the

church premises.

He said, "The assistant shepherd also got stuck in the soak-away and he was also struggling to talk. I had to rescue both of them. We pressed his stomach to flush the water out and over 20 people were there that very moment seeing everything that happened. I had to call out to some people to help us."

"Even Dongo himself knew that he would never be allowed to come and do such (a task) at night not to talk of midnight. People are just taking advantage of what happened. I never asked him to come and do any work at midnight, for what? We didn't believe the guy had died until we got to the hospital."

"We went to a particular station which they directed us to, Langbasa Police Station, and it was there that they asked us to call his people. The police told us to wait till morning so that they could follow us to the place; they saw everything; they saw Dongo on the floor after returning him from the mortuary. The police took photographs of everything."

"The police were not armed; they were not expecting such a drama. The boys were too much and they had already concluded what they wanted to do, even when I was talking to them."

Police, church react

When contacted, the state Police Public Relations Officer, Benjamin Hundeyin, confirmed the incident.

Hundeyin said, "Someone was engaged to evacuate the septic tank in the church. While he was doing the job, he fell into the septic tank. He was rushed to a hospital where he was confirmed dead. Some angry youths burnt the church. The body was not mutilated. The policemen were there and they took pictures and no part of his body was removed. No arrest has been made yet."

On the official website of CCC, the church's media officer, Superior Evangelist Kayode Ajala, in a statement, refuted the allegation of ritual killing, describing it as an attack on the reputation of the church.

Ajala accused hoodlums and commercial motorcycle riders of carrying out the arson at

the parish and inflicting injuries on the church's leaders, which had forced some members in the neighbourhood to abandon their homes.

The statement read, "The deceased Hausa man known as Dongo was quite popular in the neighbourhood and was known for the job of evacuating overflowing soak-aways. He also doubled as an Okada rider."

"The deceased Hausa man, Dongo, was contracted to evacuate the soak-away on the premises of Celestial Church of Christ, Overcomers Parish, and was actually paid for the job three days before the unfortunate incident."

"Dongo, out of his own volition, chose to do the job on the night of Thursday, 1st June, 2023. This was while the New Moon service was in progress. The Shepherd in charge of the parish, VSE Aso James, was busy in the inner altar as he was the service conductor."

"While carrying out the job he was engaged for, the deceased Hausa man, Dongo, slipped and fell into the soak-away. The Assistant Shepherd of the parish, Senior Evangelist Ayotunde Oladipupo, who was supervising Dongo as he carried out the job, immediately tried to rescue Dongo and in the process, he also fell into the soak-away."

"Church members alerted by the shouts for help abandoned the service and began a rescue operation for the two people that had fallen into the soak-away. The lifeless body of Dongo was eventually brought out, while the unconscious body of the Assistant Shepherd, Senior Evangelist Ayotunde Oladipupo, was also brought out of the soak-away."

"The unconscious Assistant Shepherd, Senior Evangelist Ayotunde Oladipupo, was rushed to a hospital, while the lifeless body of Dongo was also taken to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The family of the deceased Hausa man, Dongo, took custody of his remains with all parts of the body in place."

The church said both James and Oladipupo were hospitalised and in critical condition, urging the public to disregard reports aimed at tarnishing the image of the church.